

Working above and beyond a flawed system

November 13, 2020

Complexity of student needs, staffing shortages and disadvantage are issues that are magnified in remote and regional settings, where government services, employment and distance all play a counter-productive role in the delivery of education.

Teachers from regional areas, as well as the urban fringe, told the Gallop inquiry on Thursday of the challenges their setting brings, requiring skills above and beyond their core duties of teaching and learning. Their evidence highlighted the unique situations their daily work must encompass.

High expectations on teachers

"The intensity and the number of students and families with mental health difficulties has increased in the region. I think the expectation on schools to manage those difficulties has certainly increased. There's an expectation from the Department and the community that schools play a big role in supporting families and students, helping them to access services or the school itself to be the service centre to support them with mental health difficulties."



"The change I've seen over my career, in terms of how much teachers are focused on catering to individual student needs as much as they can, I think my classroom colleagues do an exceptional job. But there's just not the time. Nobody has all the expertise for every single student need but within a school there's a lot of expertise that can be shared amongst each other. If we had the time we could get together and develop the planning and lessons; we really could make a huge difference."

Michael Sciffer, school counsellor

Rural decline

"In my time I have noticed a rural decline that has had a significant impact on young people, a significant impact on the school and also on the community. Most recently the drought and bushfires have taken that toll to another level. Before the rains, it was not uncommon to see the upset in the faces of the children at school because they were old enough to know what was happening with mum and dad, and [in the faces] of the parents themselves."

Neal Reed, high school principal

"It is of great concern ... that the regional resources which allowed me to reach my current level of skill are no longer available to Special Education teachers being appointed now."

Tim Byrne, special education teacher

Why school counsellors are scarce

"There's definitely a shortage of school counsellors and I would say that is due to a lack of incentive to go into school counselling. You are paid the same as you were as a classroom teacher, so there's no financial incentive, it's really about career goals or personal passion around these things. If you don't have any background in psychology you have to get that yourself. It's very difficult to put yourself through a part-time study program while working full time and all the commitments involved as a classroom teacher. So there are real barriers there around people even being able to get their prerequisite training."
Michael Sciffer, school counsellor

COVID and disadvantage

"I think it [COVID] magnified, if it wasn't already well known, the provision of services in schools out west. Whether that was access to computers, whether it was access to the internet, things that we might take for granted in metropolitan centres, again highlighted the discrepancy and the divide that students out west have. It made for a very significant challenge."
Neal Reed, high school principal

Stress and the job

"Burnout is always really high in special education."
Tim Byrne, special education teacher

"Teaching is an incredibly stressful job and you do provide support for teachers if you know they're upset or they're distressed. They may have seen self-harm at school and that's quite distressing to see and provide support for. You do provide basic support for teachers in the [counsellor] role and sometimes you know it's just a colleague who trusts you and wants to talk about personal problems and things like that might be impacting their work as well."
Michael Sciffer, school counsellor

Time-consuming search for staff

"The support from the Department, again while well intentioned, I don't think has necessarily been as strong as it could have been and that's meant that hours and hours of time, not just for me but in general as a system for principals, is spent advertising positions on social media, the casual teachers network or the temporary teachers network on Facebook to try and attract people to a position rather than having centralised ongoing support."
Neal Reed, high school principal

Special education: a special role

"I think the vast majority of my RFF at the moment is spent... I just go down to the staffroom and see who's in there ... I see what they're up to and what they're working on [with special needs students]. Because I know these people will need help in some way, shape or form, I'll offer my services."
Tim Byrne, special education teacher

Thursday's hearings marked the final day of public hearings before the Valuing the teaching profession – an independent inquiry. Federation President Angelo Gavrielatos is scheduled to make closing remarks to the panel on 24 November, before the commission adjourns to consider the evidence and report in March next year.